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A Symphony of Dances

William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony*

When the *Afro-American Symphony* was performed in 1931 by the Rochester Philharmonic under the direction of Howard Hanson, it made history. It would be the first symphony written by an African American to be performed by a world-class orchestra. Two years later, in 1933, Hanson included the scherzo movement from that symphony in an all-American concert which he conducted in Berlin, Stuttgart and Leipzig. In Berlin the audience was so enthusiastic Hanson had to play it twice.[1] Considering that these concerts took place on the eve of Adolf Hitler's appointment as ›Reichskanzler‹ on January 30, 1933 and the subsequent ›Gleichschaltung‹ that followed, the positive reception given a work by an African American composer seems remarkable. The symphony was not heard again in Berlin until 1945. This time Rudolf Dunbar, a black conductor, would lead the Berlin Philharmonic in a performance of the entire symphony. In a letter to William Grant Still, Dunbar could hardly find the words to describe his experience standing before the Philharmonic conducting Still's symphony for a German audience. According to Dunbar, »the musicians went wild over the work, especially the instrumentation [orchestration]« at rehearsals.[2] The audience at the Titania-Palast on September 8 did the same. The critical success of this work in Berlin was especially meaningful to Dunbar. Upon hearing a radio broadcast of the London Philharmonic performing the *Afro-American Symphony* conducted by Dunbar in 1942, Josef Goebbels said, »England has sunk to the lowest cultural level by playing cheap nigger jazz music.«[3] Surely, Dunbar must have felt vindicated to hear from an audience member that »these people [blacks] are not decadent as [we] were made to believe.«[4]

From all indications, Still's inaugural symphony was a critical success – initially. Since the symphony's première some 70 plus years ago, musical taste has changed. The symphony, once admired for its innovative orchestration and freshness, by the 1960s was clearly past its prime. It was »evocative of the […] late 1920s, the era of Gershwin and Whiteman« according to Collins George of the *Detroit Free Press*.[5] A *New York Times* critic thought Still's symphony was »a period piece [that was] rather corny in its evocation of minstrel, blues and spiritual expression.«[6] Subsequent generations of concert goers have failed to be impressed by what audiences in the 1930s and 1940s found so appealing – dance

1 Verna Arvey, *In One Lifetime. The Biography of William Grant Still*, Fayetteville, AR 1984, p. 80.
2 Rudolf Dunbar to William Grant Still, 8 September 1945, in: William Grant Still and Verna Arvey Papers, Manuscript Collection MC 1125, University of Arkansas Libraries.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Collins George, »Concert Honors Lincoln«, in: *Detroit Free Press*, 25 November 1963, sec. C, p. 10.
6 Robert Sherman, »Carnegie Concert Salutes Black History Week«, in: *New York Times*, 16 February 1976.

and its rhythms. These are two areas overlooked in most discussions of this symphony. I will argue that African American social dances such as the charleston and the black bottom not only achieved mainstream popularity on both sides of the Atlantic, they informed the compositional choices Still made in his first symphony.

As Still's symphony became known in America and abroad, critics often made references to its dance elements. For example, a critic for the *Manchester Guardian* (United Kingdom) made the assessment that »Still's African Symphony [sic] contained some rather clever treatment of dance rhythms.«[7] Other critics identified dance elements in the symphony as well. According to David Kessler, the music critic for the *Rochester Evening Journal and Post Express*, Still's symphony »sometimes shuffles its feet, at other times dance[s] […] and sways often in the barbaric rhythm of its subject.«[8] The third movement was dismissed as not »much more than a clever fox trot«[9] by one reviewer while another was reminded of »laughter and dancing in the night.«[10] The symphony, according to Rudolf Dunbar, was apparently so danceable that he was approached about using the music in a ballet.[11] Because of Still's extensive work as a performer or arranger for some of the most popular musicals, revues and band leaders of his day, it would not be unreasonable to find dance forms ›invading‹ a symphony called the *Afro-American*. While specific dances are seldom called by name, with the exception of the ›clever fox trot‹ misnomer, the first and third movements of the symphony are informed by such African American dances as the slow drag, black bottom, charleston, cakewalk and juba.

I would like to preface my discussion of the first movement by reestablishing the symbiotic relationship between dancing and the blues. Although much has been said about Still ›elevating‹ the blues to symphonic proportions, Albert Murray, the author of *Stomping the Blues*, cautions that there is nothing »more misleading than the standard dictionary emphasis on gloomy lyrics, the so-called blue notes, and slow tempo – as if blues music were originally composed to be performed as concert music.«[12] Murray claims that »whatever else it [the blues] was used for, it was always mostly dance music.«[13] From its inception, then, the blues was virtually synonymous with dancing. In *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Alan Lomax describes being taken to a jook joint deep in the Delta where he witnessed couples performing the blues or the slow drag:

> Couples, glued together in a belly-to-belly, loin-to-loin embrace, [that] approximated sexual intercourse as closely as their vertical posture, their clothing, and the crowd around them would allow. Slowly, with bent knees and with the whole shoe soles

7 G. A. H., »The Palace«, in: *Manchester Guardian* 25 March 1943.

8 David Kessler, »New Symphonic Work Acclaimed at First Playing in American Composers' Concert«, in: *Rochester Evening Journal and Post Express* 30 October 1931.

9 Robert Simon, »Musical Events. Three Native Composers, Many Orchestras, and a Few Virtuosi«, in: *New Yorker* 11, 30 November 1935, p. 55.

10 Beverly Wolter, »Composer Conducts N.O. Symphony in Performance of Own Work Here. Urges U.S. to Cultivate Heritage«, in: Baton Rouge *State Times* 5 March 1955.

11 Rudolf Dunbar to William Grant Still, 13 December 1944, in: Still and Arvey Papers.

12 Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, New York ²2000, p. 138.

13 Ibid., p. 138.

> flat to the floor, they dragged their feet along its surface, emphasizing the offbeat, so that the whole house vibrated like a drum.[14]

From this description, we can conclude that: first, the slow drag was another term for the blues; second, the dance was considered to be highly erotic; third, the tempo of the dance had to be somewhat slow in order to accommodate the flat-footed steps and to allow maximum physical contact between partners; and fourth, the accentuation of the offbeat was an important characteristic of both dance and music. The black bottom was another dance that was associated with the blues. The dance, which likely originated in the black section of Nashville called the Bottoms, was popular in jook joints and sporting houses in the African American community as early as 1900.[15] Originally, the black bottom was danced to the 12-bar blues and, according to the lyrics in Perry Bradford's *The Original Black Bottom Dance* (1919), the dance contained the signature rhythmic profile of the charleston during the offbeats:

> Now listen folks, open your ears,
> This rhythm you will hear
> Charleston was on the after beat
> Old Black bottom'll make you shake your feet.[16]

Apparently, both the charleston and the black bottom were known in the black community years before they were introduced to a wider audience via the Broadway musicals of the 1920s. The Black bottom achieved theatrical success when it appeared in the musical *Shuffle Along* (1921) and a few years later in *Dinah* (1924). Josephine Baker introduced the dance to European audiences in her many revues.

So while Still presents the blues as concert music, it remains rooted in the dance. Of the dances discussed, the black bottom is clearly associated with the first movement. The rather involved steps of this dance included side-to-side sliding steps, hopping back and forth, twisting motions similar to the shimmy, and playful slaps to the rear end.[17] These steps were done to the 12-bar blues which, according to the lyrics in Bradford's song, included a charleston rhythm on the weak beats. All of these elements can be found in the opening statement of the blues theme from the first movement. After the initial six measure English horn solo, Still writes a classic 12-bar blues for muted trumpet. As expected, the AAB statements are reinforced harmonically by the blues progression: I–IV–V 7–I. What happens on the ›after beats‹ between statements of the blues theme is interesting. In call-and-response fashion, the horns answer the muted trumpet with a charleston rhythm on the ›after beat‹ just as Bradford's song describes. Bradford's use of the rhythm, two dotted notes of equal value written in syncopation against the meter, suggests that it was an established rhythmic gesture for the dance by the time James P. Johnson incorporated it into

14 Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, New York 1993, p. 364.

15 Pauline Norton, art. »Black bottom«, in: *NGroveDAM*, vol. 1, London 1986, p. 225.

16 Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance. The Story of American Vernacular Dance*, New York 1968, p. 110–111.

17 Norton, »Black bottom«, p. 225.

his version of the song. Other elements that correspond to the steps of the dance are also present. The slurred strings imitate the side-to-side sliding motions of the dance while the timpani and bass simulate the hopping steps. In the second statement of the blues theme, when the strings imitate the strum of a guitar, one can imagine the dancers, with hands on hips, gently slapping their backsides. By re-establishing the relationship between dance and music, it becomes apparent that Still's compositional choices were influenced, indeed determined, by the steps of the black bottom.

While using elements of the blues to express longing fits the program of a symphony that »offered a composite musical portrait of those Afro-Americans who have not responded completely to the cultural influences of today«[18], the dance element, specifically the black bottom, makes that portraiture more contemporary rather than antebellum. The black bottom signified an urban sophistication that belied its southern agrarian roots. Additionally, many blues lyrics were notorious for innuendo. Perhaps, then, the subtitle »Longing« that Still attached to the first movement is a kind of double entendre. In one sense, the blues represents the noble suffering of a people longing for a better life free from oppression, but longing can have a sexual connotation as well. Considering the licentiousness of the slow drag and, later, the black bottom, the blues in the first movement is provocative rather than »corny« as one critic in a 1976 *New York Times* review called the work.[19] So, the blues created an apparent contradiction with Still's program. Perhaps realizing his own contradiction, Still found his original program for the work to be »inadequate«.[20] This inadequacy is the result of writing a program for the work ›after‹ it had been completed.

A similar contradiction occurs in the third movement which is also dance inspired. Given the subtitle »Humor«, the third movement is more often referred to as a Scherzo. Interestingly, it does not follow the classic formulae of such a movement: it is in duple meter, rather than triple, and lacks a contrasting trio section. Rather, it maintains the jocular spirit of its Italian origins while functioning as a substitute for the traditional dance movement in a symphony. In this case, the juba, a plantation dance, is the substitution. However, this dance appears to contradict the religiosity suggested by the couplet taken from Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *An Ante-bellum Sermon* and the accretion of »expressed through religious fervor«. The juba is closely aligned with minstrelsy rather than religious worship no matter how demonstrative the service. Furthermore, the banjo, which often accompanied the dance, would hardly have been part of anyone's religious service.

Still's use of the juba as the inspiration for a dance movement is in keeping with his ›harmonic scheme‹ to portray a people not far removed from the Civil War. The juba, along with other ›characteristic‹ dances like the buck and wing, Virginia essence and cakewalk, were an integral part of the minstrel show. By the 1850s, the components of the minstrel show had become standardized into a three-part structure – the first part, the olio and the afterpiece. It was during the final walk-arounds in the afterpiece that the juba and,

18 Arvey, *In One Lifetime*, p. 24.

19 Robert Sherman, »Carnegie Concert Salutes Black History Week«, in: *New York Times* 16 February 1976.

20 William Grant Still to Irving Schwerke, 5 October 1931, Schwerke Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. Photocopy in: Still and Arvey Papers (see footnote 2).

later, the cakewalk would be performed. In his book *Lost Chords*, Douglas Gilbert gives an account of how the walk-around was done:

> At a chord from the orchestra, the company rose to their feet. As the orchestra began a lively tune in $^{2}/_{4}$ time, one of the company would step down stage from the semicircle, walk around for sixteen bars of the music and do one step of a reel, finish with a break, then resume his place in the semicircle as another stepped out and repeated the performance, varying, though, with a different step.[21]

This account is similar to what happens musically in the third movement of the symphony. After an introduction built on a dominant pedal, the orchestra begins a rousing tune in duple meter with a tenor banjo accompaniment for the 16 bars.

If we consider for a moment that Still was writing a dance movement based on the conventions of minstrel music, then the rather static harmonic plane and peculiar lack of melodically contrasting formal markers begin to make sense. The traditional Scherzo called for a tri-part division supported by contrasting themes and tonality. This Scherzo, instead, appears to follow the demands of a challenge dance whose only musical requirements are a simple vamp-like tune that allows the dancer ample opportunity for display. Thus, the key center seldom ventures very far from A-flat major for very long and the structure of the movement is episodic rather than developmental. Each episode, then, re-orchestrated more brilliantly than the last, is analogous to one dancer after another taking his turn in the spotlight.

Gestures associated with the charleston might have been incorporated into the improvised steps of the juba as well. Although the dance is believed to have originated in Charleston, South Carolina, in the early 20th century, its origins may have had an even earlier incarnation as part of an antebellum challenge dance called juba. Accounts from the period describe the juba as an elaborate jig that was often accompanied by the banjo, but more often self-accompanied by slapping parts of the body called ›patting‹ juba.[22] In her article »Juba and American Minstrelsy«, Marian Hannah Winter believes one of the elaborate »variations – crossing and uncrossing the hands against the kneecaps which fanned back and forth – was incorporated in the Charleston of the 1920s.«[23] Other authors also consider the charleston to be a direct descendant of the juba.[24] This suggests another reason for the appearance of the controversial ›quotation‹ of George Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm* in the opening measures of the movement.[25] The rhythmic profile of this tune is that of the charleston, which by the 1920s had become endemic in popular music. Furthermore, Still's usage of this rhythmic gesture is idiomatic. That is, each time

21 Douglas Gilbert, *Lost Chords*, Garden City, NY 1942, p. 13–14.

22 W. K. McNeil, art. »Juba«, in: *NGroveDAM*, vol. 2, London 1986, p. 599–600.

23 Marian Hannah Winter, »Juba and American Minstrelsy«, in: *Chronicles of the American Dance*, ed. Paul Magriel, New York 1978, p. 40.

24 Those authors include: Mary Bales, »Some Negro Folk Songs of Texas«, in: *Follow de Drinkin' Gou'd*, ed. Frank Dobie, Austin, TX 1927, p. 105–106; Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance From 1619 to Today*, Princeton, NJ ²1988, p. 227; Alain Locke, *The New Negro*, New York 1925, p. 218; and Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance. The Story of American Vernacular Dance*, New York 1968, p. 110–111.

the rhythm appears in the first and third movements, it is placed in the gaps of the main theme; and both times it appears as part of music inspired by dancing. So its appearance in the opening of the Scherzo could just as well signify a specific dance step as well as Still signifying on Gershwin.

It appears that Still used dance forms idiomatically. That is, if a dance form could be closely associated with a song, then the song form would appear as a first theme in a sonata type movement. The 12-bar blues form in the exposition of the first movement of the *Afro-American Symphony* is an example. If a movement was conceived as an instrumental accompaniment to a dance, as with the Scherzo, then the form would be episodic. The Scherzo does not develop organically, rather it is extended by adding new themes or by re-orchestrating a few; thus, the consistency in key, tempo and meter in this movement. Both usages, however, address the problem of extending short forms, common to popular music, into symphonic proportions and determined the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic choices Still made during the compositional process. Finally, the more recognizable the dance form, the more the work would be perceived to be racial. The juba, charleston, black bottom, originated in the African American community and their appropriation made Still's symphonic works obviously racial.

By the time Still's *Afro-American Symphony* was first performed in Berlin, American popular music, like jazz, and dances, like the fox trot, charleston and the black bottom, had become popular in Berlin due to the performances of such African Americans entertainers like Josephine Baker and Sam Wooding. Popular music during the period in question, like most popular music currently produced, was intended for dancing. Indeed, a song created by any Tin Pan Alley tunesmith of the day would not be considered successful unless it could be arranged instrumentally for dancing.[26] For concert goers of the 1930s and 1940s, these popular dance forms were not only recognizable, they made Still's symphony more recognizably ›American‹ than any other work Hanson conducted on his tour in 1933. In the 50 or so years since the heyday of the big bands and opulent dance halls in which they performed, the relationship between jazz, the blues and dancing has been severed. Consequently, we listen to the *Afro-American* with 21st-century ears and fail to appreciate the choices in harmony, phrasing, melody, rhythm and meter, according to dance types, that audiences from earlier decades surely recognized. As we listen again to this symphony with an ear for these popular sources, we might be able to ›hear‹ the *Afro-American Symphony* as if for the very first time and come to appreciate the enthusiasm this work elicited from its audience on both sides of the Atlantic.

25 For an enlightening discussion of this issue and the Scherzo, consult Catherine Parsons Smith, »The *Afro-American Symphony* and Its Scherzo«, in: *William Grant Still. A Study in Contradictions*, Berkeley 2000, p. 114–151.

26 Sigmund Spaeth, *A History of Popular Music*, New York 1948, p. 369.